Ship St Paul. Near Bermudas June 21st 1840

The Health of Missionaries

To the Society of Inquiry on Missions of the Theological Seminary, Princeton

Dear Brethren

Your very interesting and welcome letter of July 20th 1839 was brought to Singapore when I was absent on a visit to the Neilgherry Hills in India for my health. It was forwarded to India about the time I left that country, and consequently I did not recieve it till some time after our return to Singapore. When it came to hand I was constantly employed, so far as my strength would permit, in preparing to return to America; hence I have delayed writing until the present time: but had I written immediately on recieving your letter, you would not have recieved mine much sooner than this will reach you.

Had I been permitted in the providence of God to remain in a heathen land, it would have given me much pleasure to have correspondence with your Society and if I again return to a foreign field, I shall be happy to accede to your request.

In reference to curiosities, you will readily perceive that from want of time and especially owing to the state of my health, I could not, after I recieved your letter, collect many; but I hope I shall be able to add two or three articles to your ~~cabinet~~ collection from a few curiosities, which I had collected for other purposes, unless you are already supplied with such as I have.

I may perhaps have the privilege before long of making a visit to your beloved Seminary, but lest I should not, I will now make a few Remarks on a subject in which I feel deeply interested. It will not be necessary for me to say much in writing to you, my dear brethren, on the importance of Missions in general. I will merely add my humble testimony to the amount of evidence which you already possess, that the cause of missions is pre-eminently the cause of God, and that it is worthy of all, and much more than all the feeling which it has elicited, and the exertions which it has called forth.

The subject to which I wish to call your attention is the health of missionaries. You have doubtless, in common with other friends of Missions, observed with sorrow, that many of our missionaries are either cut down and consigned to an early grave, or arrested by the hand of some lingering disease and compeled to leave their field of labor. The fact that the great mass of the heathen lie within the tropics, while the influence and power of christianity is, at present, nearly confined to the cool and temperate regions, is a serious obsticle to the conversion of the heathen: for it renders those labors, which in the ordinary course of Providence, must precede their conversion to christianity, much more difficult to be performed. This should be looked upon as one of the natural obsticles which God has thrown in our way, doubtless for wise purposes. We should view it as one of those trials which are inseperable from the missionary work. The frequent failure of health is indeed among the severest trials, not only to the missionaries themselves, but to the churches which send them out, and to the Boards with which they are connected. But it is a trial which all who are in any way concerned

must to expect; and instead of fretting about it, or repining over it, we must learn to bear it with becoming resignation to the righteous will of God.

But the most important inquiry which we can make on this subject is, can any thing be done to prevent it? It is evident that it can never be wholly prevented; for no class of men who are brought up in a temperate climate, will ever, as a class, enjoy the same vigorous health under a tropical sun, that they would have enjoyed, in the cool and bracing climate of their native land. Yet I think something may be done to prevent, in part, the loss of health and life which results, either from these or from some other causes. I have often heard it remarked that there is more sickness in general, and more frequent cases of the entire failure of health among the American, than among the English missionaries in the East. And my own observation coincides with this remark. If this be a fact, as I believe it is, and if we can ascertain the cause of it, something may perhaps be done to remedy this difficulty at least in part.

This difference has been attributed to various causes, and as the failure of my own health has been the means of keeping my attention fixed on the subject for the last two years, I have endeavoured to examine each of them, and to form as far as I could, a satisfactory opinion as to the real cause. Many of the English attribute it to the fact, that they generally use beer, and occasionally wine, while we do not. These are articles which many of them think essential to the enjoyment of vigourous health, especially in a tropical climate. I don't however agree with this opinion; for although there may be certain states of the system when these, or similar stimulants are beneficial, yet I think that an impartial observer, even in India, will conclude that where the common and habitual use use of these drinks benefits one individual, it injures at least nine.

Others again attribute it to the fact, that the American missionaries in their opinion live too poorly. They receive too small a salary, say they and are too much afraid of incurring expense, to purchase always that kind of food, and the other necessaries and conveniences, which are the most conducive to health. But I can not subscribe to this opinion either, as a general truth. A very few such cases may have occured. There are some perhaps, who find it difficult to procure all they need (or think they need) and not over run their allowance, and who in contriving how they can make both ends meet, are subjected to care and anxiety of mind, which together with their studies and other duties, operate unfavourably on their health. And there are a few others who injure themselves in this way. Partly to avoid the trouble and expense of employing the natives to do their work, and partly to avoid the name of keeping servants, they attempt to do their own work, or a great part of it, which no European can do with impunity ~~can do with impunity~~ in that climate. Cases of this kind most frequently occur among young missionaries. But those who make the attempt, generally pay the penalty of their folly, in the injury of their health, and perhaps of their constitutions. They generally too, subject themselves to the mortification of having to abandon a scheme, which they commenced with great zeal, and perhaps with the hopes of effecting a revolution in the general practice of the missionaries. The prudent and judicious, will avail themselves of the experience of those who have been longest on the ground, and if they have any improvement to introduce, they will do well to wait till they have gained some experience themselves.

In making these remarks I am not speaking lightly of the practice of economy. This is one of the minor virtues, which the missionary more than most other men is called upon to practice. He is called upon to practice economy, as a plain matter of duty, and is generally compelled to do so from the necessity of the case. Yet we should guard against the impression, that the chief excellency of a missionary, consists in living on the smallest possible amount of money. He is sent there to do the work of the Lord, and unless he enjoys at least a tolerable degree of health, he can not perform his work: hence he should have those necessaries and comforts too, which are evidently conducive to health. I don't think however, that the salary allowed to American missionaries generally, is too low, or that any blame is to be attached to our missionary Boards. So far as I have been able to observe, the allowance made by the American Board and by our own Board to their missionaries, though generally but little more than half as much as the English missionaries receive, is about sufficient to enable them to live comfortably, and employ their time usefully in their ~~missionary work~~ the service of their Lord.

Some of the causes which I have mentioned above, have doubtless been injurious to the health of some individuals; they are therefore worthy the attention of those who contemplate spending their lives in this great work; but they are far from being sufficient to account for all the sickness which has prevailed among the American missionaries. The difference between the English and the American missionaries, or the greater amount of sickness which prevails among the latter, is I think, to be attributed principally to two causes. First, their constitutions are not generally so good as those of the English, when they enter the field; and Secondly they carry with them habits, which they had formed in the College and the Seminary, unfavourable to the enjoyment of health.

That we as a people do not enjoy the same vigorous health as the English do, is fully attested by travellers, both European and American. This difference may be seen by the most casual observer in the East Indias, and is frequently remarked upon. The different appearance of the English and American females, or missionary ladies (if you prefer the expression) is quite noticeable. In a company of English ladies, you will generally see them of a stout frame and full habit, carrying ~~with them~~ the bloom of health, and almost of youth, in their countenances, up to middle age. But enter a company of American ladies, and you will see a collection of slim-waisted and pale faced looking creatures, who present a remarkable contrast to the robust and healthy appearance of the other company. Exceptions will be met with on both sides, but this is the general rule. And the different appearance of the men is not less remarkable.

It is alledged by some that the climate of England and of Europe generally is more favourable to health, than that of our country. This may be true, and it may in part account for the facts above mentioned; but they are I think to be attributed principally to the difference in our habits. As a nation, we are a thoughtful, anxious, painstaking people. We are not content to move forward at a moderate rate, and take things easily and pleasantly. But in every department of life, whether it be politicks, business, or study, every thing is driven forwards in the high pressure system. As a people, we have very few holidays; and as individuals we give ourselves but little time for relaxation. And frequently the little time which is allotted to this useful purpose

does not prove a relaxation to the mind: for it is too often spent in planning and contriving, how we may attain some end which we are in pursuit of.

I have noticed, that most of the English missionaries, with whom I am acquainted, study hard, and labor hard too; but they have their hours for study and for other duties, and when these are past, they seem to have the power of dismissing all thought & anxiety about them. They can give themselves up to free, easy, and pleasant intercourse, with their families or their friends. But it is not generally so with the American missionaries: if they lay aside their books and go out to walk, or to ride, their minds are too often employed in planning reports, or studying sermons, or poring over the difficulties of the language, or contriving how they can accomplish this or that project connected with their work. And if they meet to spend an hour in social intercourse, these or other grave subjects, are the topics of conversation; so that instead of the light and free intercourse, which would tend to relax the mind and buoy up the spirits, it becomes the next thing to a business meeting. I do not refer to religious meetings; ~~which also highly important and~~ which should, of course, be conducted in the most grave and serious manner.

Many of the Americans perceive this difference, and are fully ~~sensible~~ sensible of the injurious influence which their own habits exert on their health and spirits. But to cast off these habits and adopt others, is almost an impossibility. This is especially true, where one's health has already suffered from this, and other causes combined. And it is seldom that the injurious effects of such habits are fully seen and acknowledged, or any attempt made to correct them, till one's health has already begun to sink. And with feeble health, and low spirits, in the debilitating climate of the East, and with our old habits of thoughtfulness and anxiety clinging to us with the tenacity of life, it is exceedingly difficult to rally the spirits, and to maintain that cheerfulness of mind, which is necessary to secure and retain, that invaluable blessing, the enjoyment of health. To maintain a high state of piety, and close and frequent communion with God, besides many other unspeakable advantages, will I admit, do much towards securing both contentment and cheerfulness: but much, very much also, depends on the state of the constitution, and our previous habits.

But the most important inquiry for us, and for all the friends of missions is this: can any thing be done to remedy this evil? If I had thought nothing could be done, I would not have troubled you with this subject at all. If we can trace these habits to their source, and begin there, much, I think, may be done to guard against them, and something also may be done to correct them after they have been formed. The traits which have been mentioned as in some degree national with us, viz thoughtfulness, anxiety, and an unwillingness to allow sufficient time for recreation, are no where more clearly developed, than among students and sedentary men in general. And among these theological students, I am afraid stand preeminent. A desire to get along as fast as possible, pervades all classes of society. In this driving age, and especially in this driving country there is a universal rush, to keep up with, and if possible to get ahead of other people. This feeling is contagious; it is therefore natural that students should partake of it in common with others. And moreover it is often desirable

fied with the name of "enterprise" or "energy of character" and is flattered and encouraged by many. But its true nature will be better understood, when we reflect, that it is the means of shortening the lives of many of our most valuable men and by impairing the health and enfeebling the constitution, it tends materially, to curtail the usefulness of others. Theological students are generally desirous to enter upon the active duties of life as soon as possible, and at the same time to acquire as much as possible during their course in the seminary. Ambition to excel in their classes, may perhaps be an additional spur to some. And again the prevalence of certain maxims and opinions which are popular of late, contribute to the same end. For instance it is a maxim frequently given, that every moment of our time should be devoted to some useful purpose: an excellent maxim, by the way, when rightly interpreted. But as a comment on this, it is alledged by some, that change of occupation is the relaxation we require. I cannot agree with this, unless you give the word occupation an almost unlimited signification. In my humble opinion the mind, in order to its continued and healthy action, needs frequent relaxation from every employment which is attended with any effort of thought, or serious attention. As I have suffered a good deal from sickness, I may perhaps be unduly sensitive on this subject. But when I was in the missionary field, I have often thought and said with entire sincerity, that if I had the same health and vigour of constitution, that I had when I entered College, I would willingly give in exchange for it, the half of all I learned in the College and the Seminary too. And I know other missionaries who have the same views and feelings on this subject.

In conclusion I would earnestly recommend to all the brethren of your Society, and especially to those who intend to ~~go~~ devote their lives to the work of foreign missions to take care of their health. And as a means to this end I think it very important to cultivate cheerfulness. As it is important to have regular and fixed hours for devotion, for regular studies, and for all other duties, so I think it equally important to have fixed hours for exercise and recreation, which last division of time should be considered as sacred as any other, except the first. And the tact which the English, as above intimated, possess in a much higher degree than we do, of dismissing entirely during the time of recreation, our studies, together with all anxiety and concern about them, is very important to the enjoyment of health. Health should if possible be preserved firm and vigorous, even if it has to be done at the expense of some study, or if it should require a longer time to complete the regular course.

As I feel deeply interested in every thing which may affect the health and usefulness of missionaries or their companions, you will pardon me for saying one word more. If I had access to any of the ladies who contemplate going on a foreign mission, I would advise them by all means to avoid the common error of crowding too many studies into the last year, or indeed into any year of their education. A robust and vigorous constitution, is the most valuable qualification which a missionary wife can possess, next to sincere and ardent piety. I have known some missionary ladies who spent their spare time before leaving America and on the voyage out, in studying Greek; and a few even attempted

the Hebrew; all of which is generally of about as much use to them, as an equal knowledge of the Mohawk would be. If they have a spare hour, I would recommend them to spend it in rambling over the hills, or in jumping the rope, if they can find no other active exercise. In their case, a good education is certainly a valuable acquisition, a knowledge of household duties is equally if not more valuable; but good health a qualification for the want of which nothing else can compensate.

With my best wishes and prayers for your happiness and usefulness, I am yours in Christian love.

R. M. Orr

To
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Of the Society of Inquiry
on Missions in the
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Mr. Orr is now in this country Sept 1841.